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# Can Only Religion Save Us?

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# The European Legacy



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# Can Only Religion Save Us?

JEFF NOONAN

ABSTRACT *This paper will examine the loss of confidence in secular bases for the normative understanding of, and response to, the fundamental social and political problems. The recent arguments of Richard Falk in favour of a religious foundation for a humane globalization will be taken as paradigmatic. While the paper agrees that the normative core of major world religions supports Falk's particular conclusion that religion* can *provide the content for a universal critique of inhumane global governance, it will conclude that the universal claim that global human solidarity today can* only *be built on the basis of religious faith does not follow. The paper will contend that the required normative foundation for the positive project of constructing global human solidarity is neither religious nor secular, but synthetic, embracing both—in what I will call, following the work of John McMurtry—the "life-ground of value."*

The end of the Cold War excited a discussion of the link between hope and history, perhaps unparalleled since the Enlightenment *philosophes* first asserted such a connection more than two hundred years ago. On the right, the victory of the United States appeared as the fulfillment of humanity's hope for emancipation. Hence, Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history in the triumph of liberal-capitalism over Stalinist totalitarianism.[1] On the non-Stalinist left, the overthrow of the Soviet dictatorship appeared not as hope fulfilled, but as grounds for hope in renewed struggles for a genuinely democratic socialism. Alex Callinicos read the revolt of the Russian and Eastern European masses as the "revenge of history" on the bureaucratic usurpers of the democratic spirit of 1917.[2] Were not these revolutions exactly what Marx had meant when he argued that the emancipation of the workers must be the act of the workers themselves?

The first decade of the new millennium, by contrast, has witnessed the return of a much older tradition in Western thought, a tradition inaugurated by Augustine that sees history as the rock upon which all human hopes are ultimately dashed. From this perspective, terrestrial history, no matter how long it extends, can never provide sufficient

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time to overcome humanity's essential imperfection. If the hope for ultimate solutions to humanity's problems cannot find its ground in history, but yet hope endures, then there must be a transcendent basis for it.[3] The failure of existing liberal-capitalism to meet the persistent problems of absolute poverty and despair, the failure of the Western left to capitalise on the energy of Eastern European movements for political emancipation, and the sudden and unexpected irruption of the "War on Terror" have created the context for a renewed suspicion and criticism of the Enlightenment link between history and the realisation of humanity's emancipatory hopes. Liberal-capitalism has indeed triumphed, but the form that globalisation has taken has dispossessed millions, weakened rather than strengthened democracy, and exacerbated material inequality between nations and within them.[4] The much discussed peace dividend never materialised, and in 2008 the largest military budget in the history of the world was passed by the United States Congress.[5] The end of the Cold War proved only the prelude to the open ended "War on Terror." Attacks on civil liberties and increases in state surveillance over private life, which used to be condemned as communist totalitarianism, are now the norm, not only in the United States but across the map of increasingly liberal-democratic in name only states.[6]

In this paper I will examine the loss of confidence in secular bases for the normative understanding of, and response to, these fundamental problems. In order to establish focus and coherence in a relatively short examination of a very complex problem, I will develop my general critique by concentrating on a specific instance of the turn towards religious transcendence, expressed in the recent arguments of the eminent American legal theorist Richard Falk. For Falk, the course of history, especially since 9/11, reveals a "declining world order."[7] Falk's argument combines masterful empirical analysis with a challenging critique of secular normative foundations, making it a paradigm contemporary instance of the more general argument that secular political theory cannot coherently ground the sort of care and concern for other human beings that "humane global governance" would require. Given that my interest in Falk is primarily as an instance of this general trend, I will supplement my reading and critique of Falk with historical material drawn from key religious texts of the world's major religions.

While I will agree that the normative core of major world religions supports Falk's particular conclusion that religion *can* provide the content for a universal critique of inhumane global governance, I will ultimately conclude that the universal claim that global human solidarity today can *only* be built on the basis of religious faith does not follow. As I will demonstrate, the normative core found in the depth doctrines of world religions can be understood and valued from non-religious perspectives, as indeed it has been by a growing body of political philosophy critical of globalisation. Thus, I will conclude that the required normative foundation for the positive project of constructing global human solidarity is neither religious nor secular, but synthetic, embracing both—in what I will call, following the work of John McMurtry—the "life-ground of value."[8] This synthetic life-ground of value depends neither on religious faith nor on a particular political ideology, but is more deeply anchored in consciousness of our shared humanity. This shared humanity is defined in terms of our shared conditions of terrestrial life, and it is precisely these terrestrial conditions of life, I will demonstrate, that form the object of care and concern of both religious and secular-minded thinkers critical of inhumane globalisation. This shared humanity can thus be discovered by either religious or secular means, provided only that either pays attention to our shared life-requirements, the

shared harm to which we are liable if we are deprived of them, and the shared capabilities for meaningful and valuable activity which grow if our life-requirements are satisfied.

## The Declining World Order

There is little doubt that the form of globalisation that Falk criticises has by and large been damaging to our shared humanity, its life-requirements, and the free, wider, and deeper expression and enjoyment of our human capabilities. Falk's general position consists of three related claims. First, the opening that the end of the Cold War created for the international rule of law, for reinvestment in public infrastructure and services, and for the creation of new institutions of global democratic governance, has now closed. Second, this opening will remain closed if no alternative is found to the dominant secularism of the post-Enlightenment world. Science and technology are ruled by corporate interests and corporate interests are driven by the system-requirement to produce ever more money-value for investors. In this way, the global system has become blind to the moral necessity of life-requirement satisfaction and life-capability realisation. Third, and following from one and two, instead of a powerful movement for humane governance, the globalisation of capitalist market forces steered by the so-called "Washington Consensus" dominates the politics of the present.

These claims are well-supported: 2.2 billion people continue to live on less than $2 per day, there has been only slow and piecemeal progress towards meeting the Millennium Goals for human development (and only where governments have acted *against* market forces), economic inequality between and within nations has been rising, warfare as a means of resolving international conflicts spreading, and the anti-globalisation movement, so vital at the end of the previous century and the beginning of this one, has been demobilised. Summing these claims up, Falk concludes that "what has been happening around the world in the last several decades suggests a new set of oppressive circumstances for humanity that cannot be addressed by secular authority or the sorts of "progress" achieved by science and technology."

Thus Falk concludes that the only political hope for reinvigorated movements for humane alternatives to the Washington Consensus lies in a renewed embrace of an open, inclusive, and tolerant religious faith. "In such a global setting," Falk asserts, "the opportunity for and the responsibility of religion becomes evident, to provide hope for emancipation and, in effect, to give spiritual grounding to efforts to move towards global democracy and human globalization."[9] Falk himself argues at the level of these general principles and does not examine the specific values concretely expressed in religious texts. However, the more general argument that I am concerned with making is best served by examining, at least briefly, actual content. What is most interesting is that when we examine the sorts of values expressed in major religious texts relevant to Falk's concerns, they all centre on the recognition and response to *terrestrial* human suffering.

Thus, to begin, we read in the Book of Isaiah: "Woe to men who add house to house, who join one field to another, till there is room for none but them in all the land."[10] The clear implication is that the Lord will punish those who disregard the life-requirements of others in favour of their own selfish desires. In the New Testament we encounter essentially the same argument. Jesus says that the blessed are those who care and concern

themselves with the suffering of others *on earth*: "For I was hungry, and you fed me, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink."[11] He goes on to add, however, that those who fail to respond to the reality of earthly suffering will be cursed. A strictly analogous demand that justice be done on earth can be found in the Islamic tradition as well. The Muslim poet al-Ma'ari, for example, warns of the doom that will befall rulers who block out the suffering of those over whom they rule: "And where the Prince commanded, now the shriek / Of wind is flying through the court of state: / 'Here,' it proclaims, 'there dwelt a potentate / Who could not hear the sobbing of the weak."[12] It is not only in the Abrahamic religions that one finds these fundamental values but also in the foundational texts of the Indian tradition. In the Vedas we read the following warning to those who would destroy others' means of life: "Those who destroy, as is their want, the simple, and with their evil motives harm the righteous, may Soma give them over to the serpent.... The fiend... who designs to injure the essence of our food... may he... sink to destruction."

Finally, in the Noble Truths of Buddhism we find the injunctions to "do no harm or hurt," "to abstain from lies and slander," and to "abstain from taking life."[13]

The common value affirmed in each of these distinct traditions is the duty to not cause suffering by depriving others of their lives or what their lives require, and to recognise and respond to suffering where one encounters it. These religious texts might thus be thought of as the first articulate expressions of the life-ground of value. While the foundational role the values they affirm could play in the construction of human solidarity is clear, what is *not clear* is that their cogency and efficacy as values depends upon religious belief. As life-values, recognition and response to suffering focuses on the humanity of the suffering person, and not what god they believe in or what nation they belong to. It is thus not evident why, as David Hollenbach argues (in a manner allied to Falk's general conclusion), "the possibility of a humanism and of a social ethics that is more than mere coping is a question of whether there is an Ultimate Presence worthy of our trust."[14] In so far as these values are *life-grounded*, their political efficacy and moral substance are, I will contend, cognizable independently of any belief in a transcendent being.

Before that conclusion can be accepted, however, a more detailed discussion of the problems that Falk's argument encounters must be provided. First, it depends upon a sharp opposition between abstract conceptions of "secularism" and "religion" which the life-ground of value reveals to be unsustainable. Second, the normative unity expressed in different religious traditions vis-à-vis the duty to recognise and respond to suffering is not always maintained in the relations of religions to one another, in particular in fundamentalist forms of these religious traditions. Third, it forecloses without adequate argument on the possibility that the secular imagination can find in the life-ground of value the resources needed to build new political movements which are not opposed to "religion" in the abstract but open to a creative moral and practical synthesis involving all who oppose the inhumanity of poverty and powerlessness. I will treat each of these problems in turn.

## The Limitations of Religious Foundations for Human Solidarity

In order to explicate the first problem, Falk's definition of religion must be examined. Religion, he says, "encompasses the teachings, beliefs, and practices of organized religion

and all spiritual outlooks that interpret the meaning of life by reference to faith in and commitment to that which cannot be explained by empirical science or sensory observation; it is usually associated with an acceptance of the reality of the divine, the sacred, the holy, the transcendent, the mysterious, or the ultimate."[15] As is evident, this definition assumes that only religion can provide meaning to life, because secular thinking is identified with empirical science alone. By identifying religion with that which cannot be explained by empirical science, he implies that secular systems of thought are exhausted by empirical science, and thus incapable of providing any coherent interpretation of the meaning of life and life's value because empirical science ignores these questions. Religion thus becomes the sole bearer of life's value by default. Religion is the bearer of humanity's conceptions of the divine, the transcendent and the holy, but it does not follow that a meaningful and valuable life presupposes belief in a divinity, in the transcendent, or the holy. It may require a sense of the sacred, the spiritual, and the ultimate, but these can be meaningfully understood from a non-religious perspective. Hence the implied antithesis between a valueless secularism and a value-bearing religious faith cannot withstand critical scrutiny.

As the arguments of Falk and Hollenbach make clear, religious thinkers assert that without belief in a divinity life would lack all meaning. Yet the values that the religious texts quoted above affirm at least imply that life can be meaningful for those who live it simply on the basis of the real possibility that life can be better or worse for the life-bearer. That is, if suffering is wrong such that a duty to respond to it as wrong is generated, then it must be the case that terrestrial life matters to life-bearers, since if it did not then suffering would be irrelevant and not generate any duty. Generalizing, one could argue that all that life requires to be meaningful is a life-form capable of treating it as meaningful. This production of meaning can be accomplished in innumerable ways—some people produce it by believing in gods, others by devoting themselves to their families, others to their communities, and still others to the solution of human problems more generally; some people create art, others strive for athletic excellence, still others for philosophical or scientific insight. Tying all these different forms of meaning production together is the underlying idea of what McMurtry calls life-value: the development and realisation of human capabilities for feeling, sensing, thinking, understanding, and creating and improving the life-conditions which the free development of these capabilities in each and all presupposes.[16]

The religious argument thus simultaneously affirms and denies the terrestrial sources of life's meaning and its being better or worse. Life is meaningful because it can be better or worse for life-bearers, and it is human action that determines whether life is better or worse. It is worse when we act so as to cause suffering, better when we act so as to alleviate it. The motivation for either form of action does not necessarily depend upon there being an Ultimate Presence who will ensure that justice is finally done, but only on our human capacity for recognising suffering when it confronts us.

The point is, therefore, that what makes life meaningful is human consciousness expressed as care and concern for life itself and its material and social contexts and conditions. If that care and concern is absent, then it would not matter whether one believed in an ultimate presence or not. I do not deny that life-value can be interpreted from a religious perspective, only that religion is not a necessary condition of understanding life as meaningful. Once this non-necessity of belief is recognised, it

becomes possible to understand the sacred, the spiritual, and the ultimate from a non-religious, life-grounded perspective. It is only if we identify secular thinking with empirical science, and understand empirical science narrowly as a machine-like drive for knowledge of quantified regularities, that Falk's argument in particular and the religious argument in general is acceptable.

Secular thinking, however, is not exhausted by empirical science. Long before there was empirical science, and still today during its reign, there is philosophy. Philosophy is a synthetic form of systematic inquiry into the substance, organisation, and meaning of being and existence. The fragmented state in which it exists in professionalised philosophy departments does not destroy this principle of philosophy's ultimate unity of vocation. Empirical science must divorce its methods from questions of meaning, but philosophy cannot without ceasing to be a distinct form of intellectual inquiry. Yet the synthetic form of inquiry which is philosophy need not be religious just because it treats of questions of ultimate meaning which empirical science is incompetent to discuss. Again, much systematic metaphysical philosophy does terminate in an idea of the divine, at least in the rationalised sense in which the divine functions in metaphysics, but it need not. Although I will not attempt it here, it is possible to provide a coherent interpretation of the universe as a meaningful totality of nested orders of complexity culminating in human consciousness which requires no idea of the divine for its coherence, its beauty, or its motivating power as a source of meaning.

From this underlying philosophical perspective it is thus possible to construct life-grounded ideas of the sacred, the spiritual, and the ultimate. As Stephen Lukes, following Durkheim argues, the sacred is simply that set of values which are regarded as non-negotiable intrinsic goods not subject to utilitarian qualification.[17] If anything is sacred in this sense, surely it must be life itself, since without life the most fundamental condition of there being values at all—conscious subjects capable of valuing—is absent. The sacredness of life-value, however, is rooted in consciousness of the unrepeatability of terrestrial life for life-bearers. Whether life was created in the mind of God or whether it evolved from self-replicating amino acids, its unrepeatability *on earth* remains the same. As the texts cited above illustrate, the moral vocation of religious thought is not directed exclusively towards an afterlife, but all affirm the basic value of making life on earth better. The religious articulation of life-values thus recognises that the quality of life has material conditions, and enjoins all to struggle here and now against situations in which those conditions are not met. Any perspective that would sacrifice life or justify reduction in its value in the name of some non-living system, whether that be a code of religious beliefs or ruling system, economic, political or geo-strategic requirements, can clearly not be the basis of a global movement for humane governance. The point is, therefore, that systems of belief become valuable to the extent that they enable "more coherently inclusive ranges of life" and disvaluable to the extent that they reduce life's ranges.[18] Thus both secular and religious systems of thought must answer to the deeper life-ground of the sacredness of life.

The spiritual as well can be coherently understood from a non-religious perspective. If we think of spirit not as an immaterial substance, but as Hegel did, as the unity of human beings established when our shared humanity is made the object of consciousness, there is no contradiction in a secular affirmation of spirituality.[19] The object of the term 'spirit' is in this case the emergent property of human community produced by this form

of conscious normative identification between empirically distinct but equally life-valuable selves. It is present wherever people experience the need to live and realise themselves in ways that are valuable to others outside their own skins. Spirit is the expansion of identity beyond the abstract self-identity of the ego and its demands to the embrace of the higher unity established in service to the common life-interests in one's own way.

An analogous argument holds with the idea of the ultimate. Nothing in the idea of a reality of which no higher can be coherently thought entails a conception of the divine. The universe itself can perfectly well be called "ultimate" without mystification or deification, and yet with the connotations of being the universal basis of value and meaning that the term has in religious thinking. Two things, Kant said, fill the mind with wonder—the moral law within, and the starry heavens above. If we think of the "starry heavens above" as a metaphor for the universe of energy upon which we as conscious, caring, valuing subjects depend, then the significance of this universe acquires a dimension not present in astrophysics. Contemplating the 'starry heavens above' is to see in the skies our own origins, literally, since the heavy elements upon which life depends were created in ancient supernovae. In this sense empirical science in its full significance—which, we should not forget, was pioneered not by atheists, but by deeply religious men like Descartes and Newton—has confronted us with our true reality and our true conditions of life. What is a more awesome or moving thought than that we are life-bearers capable of understanding, caring about ourselves and each other, and of acting freely to express that care, which no governing Idea or god intended? If anything, this non-religious understanding of the great unity of being established by life-grounded, caring consciousness, is a more profound approach to understanding the value of human morality, for if it is correct, there is nothing in the universe that can make us do what we ought, save our own decisions to do so.

Thus, to sum up the first argument, the antithesis between a valueless secularism and a value-bearing religion is false. First, values can perfectly well be understood from non-religious perspectives. Second, 'secular' is not identical to empirical science, and empirical science is not without significance to understanding values. Third, philosophy is the bridge between the cumulative results of empirical science and the ultimate values of human life. From this perspective the highest value is improvement of the conditions of life itself, since without life there is no conscious valuing subject, and without a conscious valuing subject, the existence of more particular values of any sort is impossible. Fourth, it follows from the identification of life-value as the highest value that all systems of thought, religious, philosophical, or scientific, are ultimately valuable or non-valuable according to whether they improve or degrade the quality of life. Essentially, then, the problem of value is the problem of increasing life-value, and this problem can be served well or ill by secular or religious theories and practices.

Let me now turn to the second problem, the underlying unity of purpose that Falk attributes to religious faith and upon which he rests his hope that religion can be the basis for a global movement for humane global governance. This unity, as a moral concern with the suffering of others, is real, as the citations above indicate. At the same time, however, the underlying unity of this moral message is not always recognised by practitioners of different religions, and especially not when the religious traditions which they affirm are interpreted in a fundamentalist manner.

In making this claim I am not arguing that fundamentalism is a necessary consequence of religious belief. In fact, serious empirical study of the emergence of fundamentalism demonstrates that it has quite complex causes, many of which have secular political and epistemic sources (e.g., political pressures from competing religions, the epistemic hegemony of science and secular cultures, feelings of loss of identity, and so on). As R. Scott Appleby argues, "fundamentalism . . . refers to specifiable patterns of religious militance by which self-styled true believers attempt to resist the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular structures and processes. Nothing in the definition necessarily promotes extremism and violence."[20] While Appleby is correct to refuse a necessary link between religion and fundamentalism and fundamentalism and violence, he also at the same time identifies the contingent ground of religious violence—the geo-political point where borders between different religious traditions intersect. These points of intersection can give rise to what Samuel Huntington calls "fault line wars."[21] Again, while these fault line wars are not exclusively between religions, religion can form one basis for them. In sum, religious values, understood from a life-grounded perspective, can form the normative foundation of human solidarity but, understood from a fundamentalist perspective, a fault line between different traditions can also form the basis of a narrow group identity that violently resists different group identities. In other words, there is no *necessity* linking religious belief and human solidarity. It cannot therefore be, as Falk argues, the necessary and universal basis of human solidarity.

Falk is not unaware of the contradictory nature of actual religious movements. "All great religions," he argues, "have two broad tendencies . . . the first is to be universalistic and tolerant to those who hold other convictions, . . . the second is to be exclusivist and insistent that there is only one true path to salvation."[22] While at a general level this division into tendencies might be true, it does not support the general conclusion that Falk draws. If the value of religion lies only in its universalist and tolerant moment, then, as I have argued, the values that define this moment can equally well be understood from a non-religious, life-grounded perspective. Given the reality of religious fault line wars, it cannot be maintained that there is any more necessity to the universalist and inclusivist religious tendency than its opposite. An inclusive and universalist embrace of difference is valuable because it arrests the violent and destructive tendencies that have scarred both secular and religious traditions. The foundation of the relevant values is once again neither a particular secular theory nor a broad religious tendency, but the fact that life-value is threatened by narrow sectarianisms whatever their source.

This conclusion raises a deeper historical problem with Falk's understanding of the universalist and inclusive moment of major religions. This problem is the extent to which that moment can be understood in abstraction from the action of liberal secularising forces on religious doctrine itself. Take for example Locke's classic *Letter on Toleration*. While its immediate aim was to establish the conclusion that religious faith was not a prerequisite for the competent exercise of political authority, its deeper point is that religious faith is a matter for rational individuals themselves to decide.[23] This idea underlines the inclusive and universalist moment of religious teaching, but in its origins it is political and not in itself religious. It is at least plausible to argue, then, that the toleration central to this inclusive and universalistic moment of religion is the

consequence of different religions incorporating liberal philosophical principles into their own self-understanding.

If we now gather together all the threads of argument linked in these first two criticisms we can clearly understand the problem with Falk's claim that it is only from within the inclusive and universalist moment of major religions that recognition of the harm of basic life-requirement deprivation is possible. That general problem is that Falk's argument is itself exclusionary. "Only inculsivist religion," he writes, "with a sense of the sacredness of every human being, can provide the political foundation in this global setting for a humane global governance that uses the resources of the world to deal with the foundational needs of humanity: food, shelter, health, sustainable environments, peace, and meaningful life."[24] This claim is exclusionary because it ignores the large and growing body of secular political theory that deals *precisely* with the problem of radical life-requirement deprivation.

It is a most encouraging development of political philosophy in the last thirty years that the reality of human life-requirements and the devastation that their non-satisfaction entails for human life has become a central theme across the historical divide of liberalism and socialism. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, Lawrence Hamilton, Thomas Pogge, David Braybrooke, Ian Doyal and Len Gough, David Held, Peter Singer, and David Beetham, to name only a few of the most prominent names, have all sought, in different ways, to re-ground political theory in the life-grounded recognition of the primacy of life-requirement satisfaction.[25] My own work has, over the past ten years, also contributed to this salutary development. These differing tendencies are given synthetic expression in the pioneering work of McMurtry, to whom the present argument owes the idea of life-value. The recognition of life-value is what is required as the foundation for a movement of humane governance. All that is required for recognition of life-value is openness to it. Openness to life-value "crosses classes, cultures, races and genders .... If people know of the destruction or brutal reduction of vital life ranges where no compensating gain in or security of others' life can explain it, they rebel from within as if an acquired structure of thought put them in common with the life that is lost, and the life that remains."[26] As recent examples we can think of the global antiwar movement prior to the Iraq War, the response to the suffering of the victims of the Southeast Asian tsunami, or the outrage across the United States of the bungled response to the victims of Hurricane Katrina. As I have noted, openness to the shared life-value that links humanity across divisions can indeed be motivated by religious considerations of the sacredness of life. Openness to life-value can equally be achieved by a secular consideration of the sacredness of life. What matters, therefore, is the recognition of life's sacredness (its non-fungible, non-negotiable value), not the motivations that lead people to it.

## The Exhaustion of the Secular Imagination?

Perhaps Falk would concede some of these points, but rejoin that nevertheless the problem remains: the secular political imagination has exhausted itself, leaving humanity nowhere to turn but to religion for inspiration and motivation. This claim about the exhaustion of the secular political imagination was the third and final problem I identified in my introduction. Let me turn to it now by way of conclusion.

Falk's argument maintains that the secular political imagination was focused, in both its liberal and socialist moments, on the problem-solving capacities of the state. Neo-liberal globalisation, however, has limited the power of the state to manage domestic crises because the causes of these crises, whether economic, environmental, epidemiological, or cultural, are now global. In Falk's words, "the secular imagination is dependent on the problem-solving capacities of the state, and... these have increasingly, if only tacitly, transferred to the main areas of economistic authority."[27] This failure of the political imagination is not only due to the dynamics of neo-liberal globalisation, but also to "the exclusion of religion and spiritual dimension of human experience from the shaping of the vision and practices of humane globalization."[28] Perhaps that is true on one level, but it conceals a deep lacuna as well as an illegitimate conceptual conversion of a historical impasse into an ultimate limit. I will treat each issue in turn.

Falk maintains that neo-liberal globalisation is the consequence of secular conceptions of material progress driven by scientific understanding and money-wealth. Yet he fails to examine the religious foundations of historical and contemporary justifications of capitalism. Adam Smith's metaphor of the 'invisible hand' was first expressed in his lectures on moral philosophy. There it is unambiguously treated as the operation of Providence—divine wisdom—in human affairs.[29] In the contemporary period, the inhumane globalisation of the Washington Consensus was presented by the then President Bush as having issued from a mandate of heaven to spread freedom across the world. Bush's arguments are in this dimension, if anything, inclusivist and universalist the lord has shown him the way and he feels a duty to bring others over to the path of righteousness, which just happens to be the path of global capitalism under American hegemony. Thus, if inclusivist religion is an essential moment in the justification of the very problem that Falk tries to solve, it cannot simultaneously be *the* solution to the problem. Once again it becomes clear that religious values are not normatively ultimate. Their logical form as inclusivist and universalist is normatively ambiguous at best.

More serious, however, is the unjustified conclusion that because the secular political imagination has *in the past* relied upon the problem-solving capabilities of the state, its future *is necessarily determined* by that historical horizon. Those who ignore history may be condemned to repeat it, but is it not implied in this aphorism that those who learn from history can act differently in the future? In other words, it is impossible to determine the content of the secular political imagination in the future on the basis of studying the limitations that its past exposes. There are many examples today—ranging from the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, to the worker governed factories in Argentina, to self-organising anarchist cooperatives in North America—of groups of people breaking free of both the market and the state. I am not saying that these relatively small-scale instances of self-organising power are in themselves solutions to major global problems. What they are examples of is a breaking free of secular thought from state-centric solutions towards a new life-grounded moral-political-economic synthesis. In these experiments the secular imagination finds a fecund ground for wider and deeper systematic thinking about new modes of ecologically sound, low-energy, democratic forms of social organisation whose essential characteristic is the creation of meaning and human solidarity through democratically organised work, free from the psychic coercions of consumer demand that dominate liberal-capitalism as well as from the totalitarian centralism upon which the Stalinist command economies relied.

This argument brings us to the deepest philosophical issue at work in Falk's argument, the issue of the ultimate limits of human power and capability. Falk's essential argument against the secular imagination is that its model of endless technological progress and ever expanding material wealth has blinded it to the ultimate limits of human capability, as well as to the lost life-value of all those millions of humans sacrificed on the utilitarian calculus of a greater future good. In so far as Falk exposes the life-blind character of this hubris and gives voice to the now-voiceless victims of political decisions that ranked technical achievement ahead of the preservation and enhancement of life, his argument is sound. But in so far as he at the same time asserts that outer limits of human capability can be determined from a religious perspective, he errs once again.

Falk claims that "only religion can identify the inner and outer limits of acceptable behaviour of the human species [and on that basis] provide a deep structure of guidance for humanity."[30] Yet this claim is both historically false and philosophically naive. Historically, religions have not always recognised any limitation on their own behaviour in relation to infidels, heathens, apostates, and heretics. Christianity, to speak only of the religion into which I was born, was educated as a child and adolescent, and of which I therefore know the most, legitimated the slave trade in its early days, participated with zeal in destroying the cultures of the indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America, and burned thousands of fellow Europeans at the stake, generally after periods of torture so severe and diabolical that thinking about them today literally turns the stomach. Yet we should not treat these as simple deviations from an otherwise humane and life-grounded practice. God's law is higher than human law, and if God's law commands, then the earthly executioners of those laws must obey. The finest example of this reasoning is perhaps Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, which concludes that a command from God (in this case, to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac) results in a teleological suspension of the ethical.[31] In other words, all limits on humane treatment of other humans may legitimately be held in abeyance if God so commands. So it is simply not true that religion *as such* prescribes limits on human behaviour. Whether humane limits are respected or not once again depends upon the recognition of the life-value of terrestrial existence.

The solution to this problem is not therefore to turn back to an equally abstract secularism. Science has long allied itself with the dominant political powers. Nazi physicians happily conducted the most sickening experiments on Jews, an international coalition of the greatest scientific minds of the twentieth century set aside their moral qualms and built the atomic bomb, millions of scientists and technicians serve without question the imperatives of militaries and the ruling money-value system today. When, by contrast, the value of life is recognised as ultimate, then both religion and secular science can turn towards serving life. And once life is the object of service, rather than a target of instrumental exploitation, whether for salvation or scientific progress, the brutalising reduction of others' lives will cease. It is therefore the life-ground that rules beneath secular and religious authority that is the only basis on which human movements for humane global governance can be built.

Thus we return to the problems of the limits of the political imagination. The coherent structure of guidance that Falk correctly demands is provided by recognition of the life-ground of value and the re-ordering, or re-coding, of social institutions and individual activity according to the limitations it assigns to human behaviour. What are

those limits? An exhaustive inventory is beyond the purview of this paper, but the essential items can be rather easily identified. The first is the principle that all human beings are in principle equal in life-value in virtue of the liability to harm we all share as beings with vital life-requirements, and the possibilities for meaningful and valuable life-capability realisation that open if those life-requirements are satisfied. The second is that social institutions, religious, scientific, political, cultural, exist to serve life; life does not exist to serve life-blind value systems. Where the lives of some are targeted and destroyed so that a life-blind value system may advance, there we always find an illegitimate transgression of life-value limits. Third, the life-ground of value can be understood from either a religious or a secular perspective, and the value of either is dependent upon the degree to which either is consciously life-grounded. Without connection to the life-ground both secular and religious systems of thought can become life-destructive, and feel themselves justified in becoming so.

In conclusion, there is no higher value than life's maintenance, development, and enjoyment in each and all of its bearers. The proper orientation of the political imagination is towards new ways of mobilising collective thought and practice to progressively turn major social institutions towards the life-ground. We already have the institutions necessary to solving the problems of inhumane globalisation, what we lack is constitutionally entrenched and democratically enforced anchoring of their operations in the service of life-grounded goals. We have universities that cultivate our cognitive and imaginative powers, we have hospitals that cure the sick, we have the framework for genuinely democratic institutions of social governance, we have the principle that in a free society law and not the avarice and vanity of individuals rules; we have many permutations of the life-grounded normative principle that life is of equal value for all life-bearers, we have wide public acknowledgement in principle that war and violence only produces more war and violence, we have highly evolved systems for the production of life-requirement satisfying goods and services, we have cultural institutions through which the beauty-creating power of human imagination finds protean expression, we have evolved practices of caring for and loving other humans, and above all we have conscious minds that can, when opened, connect across barriers and differences to recognise the equal life-value of other humans, connections which, when established enable us to act freely towards an open horizon of ever deepening quality of life for all.

## NOTES

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